

# Handle with Care! Why Teaching Art to Primary School Children is Still Important

Sheila Ceccarelli from AccessArt addressed Somerset Primary Art-Coordinators at the SPAEDA Annual Art Conference, stressing the importance of creativity for each and every child at school.

After many requests for a transcript of the speech, AccessArt is sharing it in the hope that it will help teachers and schools build the best possible creative offer for their pupils.

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Thank you to [SPAEDA](#), Sara and Alice, for giving me the opportunity to tell you a bit more about AccessArt, the work that we do, and how we can support you.



## Introduction

Paula Briggs and I have been working together since finishing the RCA sculpture school in 1994 and coincidentally both moving to Cambridge. We started on the ground via our first organisation - Cambridge Sculpture Workshops, 23 years ago, working in schools, museums and galleries and forming relationships with influential organisations which are still important, and inspiring to us now - like **NSEAD** and [Engage](#) - Lesley what an honour to be here with you today!\*

In 1999 we saw the internet and recognised that we had before us the perfect platform to fill the great need to support, enrich and promote creativity in schools and enlarge our campaign for making, so we set up "AccessArt" and have been

going ever since. We are now a UK charity with a growing following and believe that we are as needed now, as we were when we were founded, arguably more.

## **AccessArt: An Ideas Bank**

AccessArt is an ideas bank full of open-ended creative approaches to facilitating and developing fine art skills and creative thinking - it's a place where we hope ideas are planted, which you can then take away and develop and change/adapt as your own.

It's also full of practical tips such as how to set up an art room, how to shape your curriculum, around all areas of fine art from drawing, sketchbooks, colour, printmaking and making - it covers how to hold a pencil (or unlearn how to) - and lots of campaigns and participatory projects - including our latest campaign "Brilliant Makers" and the "AccessArt Village", which is now on tour nationwide. Resources are primarily created by artist educators for teachers and are based on actual workshops or classroom sessions. All resources are written and illustrated with the aim of enabling and enriching creativity. We now have more than 750 AccessArt posts and last year were seen by half a million users - we have 15,000 subscribers and almost 2200 members.

What I hope to do today is reassure you and back you up, and say that by supporting your children's creativity - you are wholly on the right track.

## **Why is Creativity Competing with STEM and Literacy Targets for Time and Status in Our Schools?**

Jack Ma addressed the [World Economic Forum](#) last month and said that only by changing education can children compete with machines. He suggested that with machine learning and search engines that our view about, not just what we teach, but why

we teach - needed to shift and that role of education was going to fundamentally change. For a hundred years, until now - education has been primarily about "factual learning," but Mr. Ma said, we now need to teach "independent thinking, teamwork, care for others... ..painting, art... to make sure that everything we teach should be different to machines." In other words, creativity and empathy are the things that machines simply, will never be able to do.

But it's hard, and not helped by government emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Literacy targets and strategies, which despite going against many educationalists' instincts - (not that the ambition to produce scientists and engineers is not applaudable), but not to the exclusion of Art and creativity. Everyone in this room knows, that's counterintuitive, and anybody who has engaged in creative activity - of any kind, knows that to create is to think, feel and communicate - apart from the fact that, if we want to produce a generation of engineers and scientists it would actually be helpful if they were creative and innovative!

So just to say, that even if sometimes you have the feeling you're swimming against the tide - you are absolutely right to be seeking to improve your school's creative offer. Absolutely right.

I also hope to address why it is important to defend Art and creativity, not as an auxiliary , "soft" subject - but one that is not only essential to the individuals' forming of self, but educationally significant. After years of observation and experience - I feel that I can really go beyond - and say that it's actually helpful to move away from the idea that Art as a subject at all, but that actually all the skills, nestled within it, are "core."

However, unlike numeracy and literacy, there is no ambitious strategy at government level to ensure that children reach

competency targets in Creativity, and actually, we would argue that children come away from primary school, de-skilled creatively and often hugely lacking confidence in their ability and even right to create.

There's this idea, that somehow you don't need to teach art, that it's innate and those people who are creative just will be "creative."

Well, it is true, like in any other area of learning, you do have people with talent, but really that way of thinking is farcical; you don't not teach maths to the numerically talented? Or not teach English to children who can spell. Likewise, you don't only teach maths to the numerically talented, or only teach English to the children who can spell. It just doesn't make sense educationally.

And, on a strategic level of course, quite a gamble as I'm sure you are aware, the creative industries are the fastest growing in the country, and the third largest sector, and one that there is likely not going to be the pipeline through our schools to fill.\*

Remember, that the United Nations states that Creativity is a human right: [The Right to Artistic Freedom](#). We are all creative and we all have a right to express ourselves creatively.

## **What Should our Skills Wish List Really Be?**

Creative skills, like everything, take experience and practise to develop and mature. Even the most naturally gifted need to develop their creative thinking and expressive skills to truly reach their potential, and everybody else does too.

What we're trying to achieve is fluency in expressing ourselves visually and three dimensionally and in our understanding of materials - so - looking into the future, and

trying to project the skills your pupils might need, if AccessArt say were to give you clear targets (as the government has not), by the end of Key Stage Two - we'd say they should be able to:

- Communicate an idea through drawing,
- Express themselves through drawing, making, printmaking and sketchbooks
- Understand and use colour,
- Have been introduced and show basic competency in the use of tools including: Scissors, pliers, glue-guns, hammers and junior hacksaws,
- Think through making - including understanding mechanisms like hydraulics and movement,
- Understand basic materials behaviour including metal, wood, plastic, natural materials, Modroc, clay, felt, smart materials,
- Sew,
- Construct - explore sculpture and the 'poetry of space' and communicate an idea through making, (And by the way - all the scientists and doctors in the making are going to be very grateful that you taught them how to use their hands competently - and if you're ever one of their patients and they're stitching you up - you'll be happy you taught them sewing too!\*)
- Illustrate,
- Animate,
- Design a poster for an event, or packing for a product,
- Solve a problem through invention
- Take risks, experiment, explore, imagine, interpret, play, communicate etc.

And incredibly importantly, be able to interpret other peoples' work, communicating and talking about what they're seeing.

All these overarching targets - or this wish list of skills for our children, takes time and practise for them to develop

- and pupils can not be expected to magically have skills in place, ready for secondary school challenges, if they've not had rich experiences at primary school - and plenty of them.

## **How Can We Support Teachers To Fulfil Their Responsibility as Educators to Teach Art and Creativity?**

So then, if we're all in, and agree these are useful skills for our budding future creatives and thinkers, then this moves on to the next hurdle, and one that Paula talks about in her book [Make, Build, Create, Sculpture Projects for Children](#) (published by Black Dog) - that making and art is messy and hard to control and very difficult to manage in the classroom. Which again - points us to saying that if we know that by teaching Art, and creative thinking, you are fulfilling your obligation as an educator - then it would be easier to do - because the school, and even extended community would be geared up to supporting and enabling you to do it.

So, we're all behind you - what can we start to put into place to help you? Who are the people in your community who can help you? What changes can be made to the school's physical space or timetable to enable making and creativity to happen. Do you need an Art space with a sink, storage, materials, more time?

I'm sure that many of those questions will be answered by Sara, Alice, and their team today.

## **Protecting and Respecting Creative Processes and Entitlement**

But, my final question for you, as educators, is how can we implement all of this, without getting bogged down into 'measure' and 'evaluation,' both of the child and the school? I would go with a very old fashioned model, not unlike when I was child in the 70's, where it is taken on face value that

creativity is integrated into every day learning, so that skills can be nurtured and developed, without pressures of assessment.

Be mindful that creativity is something very, very hard to measure and easily lost when not celebrated. Through our creative endeavours we're at our most open, honest and sensitive and most vulnerable to criticism.

So, handle with care!

Our creativity is something we should trust and be able to fall back on during our hardest challenges, throughout our lives. So, as teachers I feel that while campaigning for creativity to be valued and recognised as the most powerful learning and expressive tool - it is also respected and nurtured as a very delicate and highly fragile process.

It's very important that as educators we learn how to recognise a process for what it is and not put our own cultural or aesthetic constraints onto interpreting a child's work - but recognise that every act of creativity or creative action - any impulse to make a mark, is potentially important in creating the next generation of innovative, creative producers.

Collectively, we need to examine and implement, what is it in the childhood soup of experiences that forms the creative thinkers and doers of the future, and how we, as educators create the right environment for them to flourish.

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### **Note**

This is the transcript of my speech given to Art-Coordinators at the **Somerset Primary Art Conference**, organised by [SPAEDA](#) at Hestercombe on 23rd February 2018. Thank you to Sara Dudman and Alice Crane for inviting me to be keynote speaker.



\*Lesley Butterworth is the General Secretary of NSEAD

\*The **NSEAD** (National Society of Education in Art, Craft and Design) have been working for 130 years supporting and defending the interest of "our" subject in the UK.

\*The reference to surgeons needing to learn to use their hands competently and learn to sew, was brought to my attention by Susan Coles, highlighting the work of [Professor Roger Kneebone](#), during an APPG for Art, Craft, Design in Education, chaired by Sharon Hodgson MP.

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**This is a sample of a resource created by UK Charity AccessArt. We have over 1500 resources to help develop and inspire your creative thinking, practice and teaching.**

**AccessArt welcomes artists, educators, teachers and parents both in the UK and overseas.**

**We believe everyone has the right to be creative and by working together and sharing ideas we can enable everyone to reach their creative potential.**